

CHAPTER 9

 **GOVERNMENT**
Biblically Balanced

Churches are not just the sum total of believers and their families; they are organizations with intentional structures. Not every church member has the same role in the overall structure. Some teach, others rule without teaching, still others serve without ruling. Is government good for the church? God thinks so. He desires that church affairs be done ‘properly and in an orderly manner’ (1 Cor. 14:40 NASB). The Bible speaks about church government, not in detailed form, but sufficiently for God’s people to know how to organize as His church.

Foundations

Before we consider specifics, it’s important to understand the foundations of church government. Earlier we learned that man was created to rule the lesser creation. Even after man’s fall into sin, God appointed rulers to govern His world. This also applied to Israel, His chosen nation. He appointed Moses as lawgiver, Samuel as judge, and David as king.

Even after the nation was conquered and sent into exile, God returned His people to the land under the leadership of Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor.

Old Testament Israel was not an end in itself. It was a kingdom that needed to be expanded. In the New Testament, the Israel of old was broadened to become the 'Israel of God' (Gal. 6:16), a commonwealth that included both Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11-22). This is called the church of Jesus Christ. Like the Israel of Old, the church is called a holy nation (Exod. 19:6; 1 Pet. 2:9) and a visible manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth (Rev. 1:4-6).

Every kingdom requires a king. The rulers of Old Testament Israel served as types and shadows of the ultimate ruler of God's people. In Matthew 28:18, Jesus spoke these words to His church: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'. Here stood a lawgiver greater than Moses, a judge greater than Samuel, and the King greater than David.

Like His Father who ruled through His image bearers, Jesus rules through His office-bearers. To His immediate successors He said, 'I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom' (Luke 22:29). How should they exercise this authority? Jesus told them, 'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven' (Matt. 16:19; 18:18). This is legal language. Binding involves closing, while loosing involves opening. Binding declares that someone is outside of the Church through unbelief or censure while loosing proclaims that a person is loosed from sin and received into the Church.

Notice that Jesus didn't give this power to everyone. He gave it to the apostles. But these elite disciples aren't around anymore. They served as a foundational level of leadership

by receiving and recording the word of God (Eph. 2:20). The leadership passed from them to others called *presbyters*. In Acts chapter 20, Paul instructed the Ephesian presbyters (v. 17) to rule the church to which the Holy Spirit made them overseers (v. 28). The office of presbyter continues to govern the church today.

Presbyterian Government

Different churches have different forms of government. Some are hierarchical with ranking officials both inside and outside the local church while others resist outside influence. The former is called *Episcopalianism* while the latter is known as *Congregationalism*. Neither best expresses the form of Biblical government.

Episcopalianism is defined as a church ruled by *bishops*. The word stems from the Greek word *episkopos* which means ‘bishop’ or ‘overseer’. It’s a hierarchical system with early roots in church history. At the top sits the archbishop, or in the case of Roman Catholicism, the pope. While Episcopalianism has some attractive features such as a clearly defined chain-of-command and an impressive historical pedigree, it lacks Biblical support. Scripture, you see, links a bishop (*episkopos*) with a presbyter (*presbuteros*). We’ve already seen that the Ephesian presbyters were considered to be overseers/bishops of the church. In Titus chapter 1, the appointed presbyters (v. 5) were also called to be overseers/bishops (v. 7). Church tradition, however ancient and efficient, must always submit to the greater authority of Biblical revelation.

Congregationalism or independency is defined as a church ruled by the *congregation*. This is the system employed by most evangelical churches today. While this system recognizes different offices within the local church, it resists

hierarchies and generally de-emphasizes connections with other churches. In such a system, inter-church connections, however useful, are still optional. Accountability outside of the congregation is a matter of preference.

The Bible, however, presents the church as interconnected. Acts 15:1-30 describes the meeting of the Jerusalem Council that was convened to deal with the heresy of the Judaizers – those who wanted to impose the Mosaic Law as a condition for salvation. This Council included commissioners from different churches. In fact, Paul, Barnabas, and some others were appointed to attend this council on behalf of the churches in Asia Minor. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church collective (vv. 2-4). Then the council debated the issue (v. 7), came to an agreement (vv. 19-21), and implemented their decision through a circular letter (vv. 22-30). This council ruled on a vital doctrinal matter that affected the whole church. If it had only been a voluntary meeting, then heresy could have been tolerated in some local or regional churches. Permitting but not requiring broader assemblies has the potential to compromise the broader accountability of the church.

What is the alternative to these inadequate forms of church government? The answer is *Presbyterianism*. This is defined as a church ruled by presbyters at local, regional, and denominational levels. Presbyter comes from the Greek *presbuteros* which means ‘older’ or ‘elder’. In Biblical times, older men had the respect and maturity to lead their families and communities. These ‘elders’ served as representatives of the people in covenant dealings (Exod. 24:9; 2 Sam. 5:3; 1 Kings 8:1) and exercised authority over Israel (Deut. 19:12; Josh. 20:4). Yet over time, this term became more flexible. It could describe rulers distinguished from priests or scribes (Luke 20:1), an assembly of rulers that included priests

and scribes (Acts 4:8), or a tradition of scribes (Matt. 15:2). Presbyters were present in the synagogue (Luke 7:3-5) and in the earliest congregations of the church (Acts 11:30; 14:23).

With all of these possibilities, how should we interpret this word? The answer is found in 1 Timothy 5:17: 'Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of a double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching'. Here we see the flexibility of the term in allowing for two groups under the same heading. The former group could be older men who rule their house well (1 Tim. 5:1) or officers who rule the church well (Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:28). The latter group, however, are singled out for a specific reason: they labored in preaching and teaching. The New Testament uses different titles to describe this group. As servants of the word, they are called *ministers* (Luke 1:2; Eph. 6:21), in respect to oversight, they are known as *overseers* (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1), as shepherds of the flock, they are considered *pastors* (Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:2), as instructors of the faith, they are designated *teachers* (1 Cor. 12:28-29; Eph. 4:11), and for the respect of the office, they are deemed *presbyters* (Acts 20:17; Titus 1:5-8; 1 Pet. 5:1). Like the New Testament elders who succeed their Old Testament counterparts, these New Testament word-ministers succeed the *prophets* who proclaimed God's word to His people (Isa. 52:7/Rom. 10:15; Col. 1:25-28; 2 Tim. 4:2, 5) and the *priests* who publicly taught the word (Deut. 31:9-11; 2 Chron. 15:3; Neh. 8:1-9) and administered the sacraments (Lev. 6:8-30; Heb. 9:1-10). Word ministers are set apart as officers in the church by their gifts and calling.

Presbyterianism involves more than local presbyters. It's also expressed by the word *presbuterion* (presbytery). Paul wrote to Timothy, 'Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the *presbytery* laid their hands on you' (1 Tim. 4:14). Here the presbytery recognized Timothy's gift and ordained him to use it. The Council of Jerusalem

Galley Proof

was composed of apostles and presbyters (Acts 15:4). This means that presbyters function at various levels. Presbyterian churches are interconnected from the session (local government) to the presbytery (regional government) to the general assembly (denomination-level government).

There is also a third office in Presbyterian government. The Bible speaks of the office of deacon (*diaconos*, a word that can also mean *minister* or more commonly, *servant*) which assists the church by attending to the temporal needs of the people. The first deacons assisted the apostles by ‘serving tables’, freeing them up to focus on word-ministry and prayer (Acts 6:1-7). Later deacons also assisted presbyters (1 Tim. 3:8-13), a practice that continues into the present. Through these offices and their interconnections at various levels, Presbyterianism provides a Biblically-balanced approach to church government.

Questions for Review and Discussion



1. What are the Old Testament foundations for church government and how did they find fulfillment in the New Testament?
2. How does Christ rule His Church?
3. What is Episcopalianism and what are its problems?
4. What is congregationalism and what are its problems?
5. What is Presbyterianism? How does the Old Testament inform our understanding of this system?
6. How are word ministers and ruling elders differentiated in the New Testament?
7. What are the origins and responsibilities of deacons?